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ABSTRACT

A study investigated what adults think about the nature of changes in reading ability across the life span. Subjects, 121 undergraduate students at two major midwestern universities and 24 non-faculty employees at one of these schools, were asked to list five or more skills which they thought were important for being a good reader at four different ages: age 6 (a first grader); age 10 (a fifth grader); an individual the same age as the subject; and a 70-year-old adult. The skills mentioned by the subjects were coded according to nine categories derived from reading research literature and discussions with several experts in reading research. Results indicated that the adults in the survey understood that there are particular skills which are important for good reading at any age, but that they were less certain of changes in reading skills and behaviors that can occur over the life span. (RS)

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Literacy Research Report No. 2

ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGES IN READING ABILITY ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN

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ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGES IN READING ABILITY ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN

ABSTRACT

There is virtually no research reported in the literature which specifically examines what adults think about the nature of changes in reading ability across the life span. Because underlying cognitive skills and situational aspects of life are subject to change over time, it is inevitable that reading skills developed in childhood will undergo changes. This survey study represents a first effort to examine adults' perceptions about the nature of these changes. The evidence suggests that adults lack good understanding of the discontinuity present in reading skills and behaviors. Findings from this survey are limited, however, due to the uncertain measurement properties of the questionnaire. This exploratory study, nevertheless, illustrates the importance of studying adults' understanding of cognitive developments in various domains.

There is little dispute that reading skills are subject to change over the course of the literate individual's life span. Given proper instruction, the child develops from a non-literate individual into a literate student capable of reading a variety of text sources. The literate student then enters the adult world of work and may read numerous kinds of materials depending not only upon his or her occupation, but also educational attainment, interests, and social network (Guthrie, Seifert, & Kirsch, 1986). In later years, certain sensory and perceptual declines due to the natural aging process may inhibit the adult's reading activity in terms of the frequency and duration of reading--although not invariably so (Check & Toellner, 1984; Ribovich & Erickson, 1980).

Chall's (1983) theory of reading development describes the discontinuous (i.e., stage-like) nature of reading from childhood to early adulthood. Other work (e.g., Smith, 1988) has suggested that reading researchers need to seriously examine the continuities and discontinuities of reading behaviors, attitudes, and skills across the adult years as well. There is, for example, research that has examined age-

related changes in memory for text. This research generally shows that older adults are poorer at recalling information read when compared to younger adults (Zelinski, Light, & Gilewski, 1984). This research does not suggest, however, that older adults are less able readers than younger adults.

If adults think about how their cognitive skills are likely to change as they grow older, they may spontaneously or purposefully adopt strategic behaviors to either maximize their expertise or minimize anticipated declines in their cognitive skills. While cognitive psychologists and reading researchers know that reading skills, and the cognitive processes that underlie these skills, change over the course of the life span, it is not clear that the majority of laypersons recognize these changes.

Knowledge about cognition (and associated changes in cognitive ability) is an aspect of metacognition. Metacognition is theorized to be an important aspect of reading skill development consisting of two overlapping dimensions: (1) knowledge about cognition and (2) strategies for regulating cognitive activity (Baker & Brown, 1984). So, it may be assumed that if adults are knowledgeable about general human cognitive abilities, as well as the likely developmental course of these abilities throughout life, such knowledge may enable adults to (1) have reasonable expectations of their own reading behaviors and the development of their children's reading skills; (2) understand and cope with <u>real</u> and <u>perceived</u> changes in their own cognitive skills as they age; and (3) develop behaviors to compensate for changes (e.g., declines) in reading ability. A question of interest, then, from a developmental perspective is, "Do adults recognize that reading skills change with age?" This question was addressed in a survey with a group of 145 adults recruited from two universities.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 121 undergraduate students at two major midwestern universities and 24 non-faculty employees at one of these schools. The ages of the subjects ranged from 18 to 65 years. The students were primarily, although not exclusively, education majors and were recruited from education courses. The non-faculty employees had occupations such as carpenter, typist, secretary, computer programmer, and admissions officer. The educational level of the employee group varied from having a high school diploma to post-graduate degrees.

Procedure

Subjects were given a survey form which asked for demographic information. On the second page of the survey, they were instructed to list five or more skills which are important for being a good reader at four different ages: a first grader (age 6), a fifth grader (age 10), someone the same age as oneself, and a 70-year old adult. Subjects were informed that there were no correct answers to this survey and that the purpose was to determine what they thought about the reading skills and behaviors of children and adults. No other instructions were given.

Results

Following data collection, the skills provided on the questionnaires were coded according to fifteen a priori categories. These categories were derived from the reading research literature and were assumed to cover the range of skills and abilities required for reading. Additional validity for selection of these categories was provided by discussions with several experts in reading research. Because

several of the categories overlapped (e.g., comprehension and memory skills), they were then collapsed into nine categories for ease of interpretation:

(1) using resources (e.g., a dictionary or thesaurus; asking a teacher for help)

(2) perceptual/motor (e.g., good vision and hearing; having good imagery abilities; speed reading; concentration)

(3) problem-solving and comprehension (e.g., being able to integrate new information with prior knowledge; good memory abilities; being able to solve reading problems and understand new or complex ideas; good vocabulary; decoding and reliance on phonics)

(4) strategy use (e.g., looking back in a text to clarify incongruous information; note-taking; mnemonic strategies)

(5) managing the reading environment (e.g., selecting a quiet place to read; reading in a well-lit room)

(6) affective/motivational (e.g., enjoyment of reading; making time to read things of interest; curiosity)

(7) personal attributes (e.g., being "well-read"; being an "intelligent" person)

(8) personal reading theory (e.g., thinks of reading as communication, as an author-reader interaction)

(9) instruction/practice (e.g., reads above grade level; reading is an everyday routine; observes and imitates appropriate reading models).

Subjects' responses were categorized by two independent judges. Interrater reliability equaled .83. Disagreements were resolved by discussion. There was a total of 2,665 skills listed by the respondents, and these were evenly divided among

the four age categories (same age = 26%, 1st grader = 25%, 5th grader = 25%, 70+ adult = 24%).

The most-cited skills were in the category of problem-solving and comprehension (29% of total), followed by affective and motivational (21%), perceptual/motor (17%), personal qualities (14%), and strategy use (11%). This pattern was consistent across all four target ages. The other four categories, when combined, comprised the remaining 8% of the skills listed. Two-thirds of all of the skills generated concerned problem-solving/comprehension, affective/motivational, and perceptual/motor skills involved in reading.

Although subjects were not asked to judge the relative importance of various skills at each age, the data suggest that subjects see little variation in the types of skills required for "good" reading from early childhood into adulthood and old age. Responses were examined to find evidence that subjects recognized that different kinds of skills are more important at some ages than at others (e.g., importance of decoding in first grade, importance of critical reading in adulthood). Generally, responses varied little across the target ages. That is, adults were seen as possessing the same kinds of reading skills as children.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the adults in this survey study understand that there are particular skills which are important for good reading at <u>any</u> age. They are less certain, however, of changes in reading skills and behaviors that can occur over the life span. For example, there was little evidence in the descriptions provided that adult reading skills differ either qualitatively or quantitatively from the reading skills of children. The results suggest that the adults are unaware of

how their own and others' reading skills are likely to change from childhood to young adulthood.

The adults also failed to recognize that the reading skills which are important for older adults may be quite different from those skills which are important for children or young adults. When considering elderly readers (age 70), for example, many respondents assumed that older adults lose certain abilities--primarily due to psychomotor or sensory declines--with age. Such responses indicate that they believe that older adults have much difficulty with reading. Research has shown, however, that this is not true (Scales & Biggs, 1987) except in the case of the very elderly and those in poor physical health (Drotter, 1980).

The results of this study are limited by the survey instrument which has not been validated. Perhaps more in-depth questions would provide a clearer picture of adults' knowledge of changes in reading skills over the life span. Subjects were not asked to describe a specific sequence of changes over the life span, or to judge the importance of particular skills at different ages, but to simply list important skills likely to be found at the four different ages listed. This instructional set may have influenced how they thought about the skills of readers at different ages. Further, the reliability of the instrument is open to question.

In summary, the adults in this study failed to take note of the discontinuities that exist in reading skills over the life span. If adults were more knowledgeable about changes in reading skills and behaviors from childhood to late adulthood, would this knowledge enable them to be better, more skillful readers? Although we are unable to answer this question from the limited data and intent of the study, it is a question that is deserving of further investigation. It is important for individuals within a literate society to understand that reading is more than

simply learning discrete skills. Reading is a dynamic process driven by cognitive skills that change across the lifespan. Certain skills may be more salient at some times during the lifespan than during other times.

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